

**Statement of James E. Bennett, A.A.E.
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On Behalf Of
The American Association of Airport Executives/Airports Council International-North America
House Homeland Security Subcommittee on
Economic Security, Infrastructure Protection, and Cybersecurity
“Improving Management of the Aviation Screening Workforce”
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Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you and the subcommittee for holding this important hearing to explore improvements in managing the nation’s aviation screening workforce. Although the Aviation and Transportation Security Act (P.L. 107-71) gave the federal government direct regulatory and operational control over all aspects of passenger and baggage screening at commercial service airports, the airport community has worked aggressively since the events of 9/11 to partner with the Transportation Security Administration to meet its mission and mandates in this area. Given the public nature of airports and the inherent responsibility we have to ensure the safety and security of our facilities, airport operators are eager to play an even more active role in developing solutions in this area and in addressing other aviation security-related challenges.

I have been involved in pursuing improvements to airport security for a number of years in leadership positions at airports in Phoenix and in Washington and as an active member of both the American Association of Airport Executives – which represents the men and women who manage primary, commercial service, reliever, and general aviation airports – and Airports Council International - North America – which represents local, regional and state governing bodies that own and operate commercial airports in the United States, and Canada. I currently serve as Chairman of the ACI-NA Government Affairs Committee and would note for the record that I am here in that role today to testify on behalf of AAAE, ACI-NA, and our Airport Legislative Alliance, a joint legislative advocacy organization.

Before discussing some of the specific areas in which improvements can be made with regard to passenger and baggage screening, I want to emphasize the fact that enhancing the security and safety of airport facilities and the aviation system remains the number one priority for airport operators. While a number of my comments focus on improving the efficiency of the screening process, the fact is that improved security goes hand-in-hand with that goal. Long lines and poor customer service does not equal better aviation security. To the contrary, long lines in airport terminals and at security screening checkpoints are inviting targets for terrorists as past experiences prove. Improving the screening process through better management and the deployment of better technology will help reduce that immediate threat, help target scarce resources on areas of greatest risk, provide passengers with better service, and free resources for other homeland security needs.

Growing Traffic Levels Make New Approaches to Screening a Necessity

As every member of this subcommittee knows as a frequent traveler, passengers are returning to our nation’s skies in record numbers. The increased volume combined with problems inherent in today’s labor intensive screening system have pushed the Transportation Security Administration’s passenger and baggage screening capabilities to the limit as evidenced by ever increasing wait times at passenger screening checkpoints and by growing problems with checked baggage screening. Without dramatic changes to the aviation security model in use today, we will not be able to meet the demands created by the nearly 300 million passengers the Federal Aviation Administration projects will be added to today’s already crowded aviation system within the next decade.

A recent report in USA Today entitled “Checkpoint or Choke Point” highlighted a number of airports where passengers can wait in lines up to two hours or more before they clear security. Maximum wait times of 45 minutes or more are not uncommon. Problems and delays with baggage screening are also

beginning to take a toll. As reported in the July 4, 2005 Washington Post, a number of flights have been routinely delayed this summer at Dulles Airport as planes sit at the gate waiting for passenger baggage to work its way through the screening process.

While additional screening resources may ease the situation at some airports, we all understand that the realities of the federal budget situation and the myriad of competing homeland security priorities make it highly unlikely that a mountain of new funds will somehow miraculously appear to deploy additional screeners. And, while a number of airports have a genuine need for more bodies, it is clear that the answer moving forward lies in fundamentally changing our approach to security screening rather than in putting band-aids on the existing, personnel-dependent screening system.

As the subcommittee heard in recent hearings, the deployment of better technology holds great promise in allowing TSA to meet that goal in the long-term. The in-line installation of explosive detection equipment in the nation's airports, for example, will quickly pay huge dividends in terms of enhanced security and dramatically reduced TSA personnel requirements. Additionally, the Registered Traveler program and others aimed at focusing scarce resources on those individuals that represent the highest risk will undoubtedly enhance security and system efficiency, as will improved technology at screening checkpoints.

Unfortunately, we are at least a few years away from making the promises of those technologies a reality. To deal with pressing challenges in the short-term, Congress must provide adequate resources and TSA must do a better job of deploying those resources while working to become more responsive and innovative in its approach to screening. As the limited experience of the five private screening pilot program airports (PP5) and a few other TSA-managed locations has helped prove, devising local solutions to local problems can pay enormous dividends and should be encouraged to the greatest extent possible.

TSA should build on some of the successes of the PP5 program and work to make the Screening Partnership Program (SPP) – also known as the opt-out program – more viable and attractive to airports. Additionally, TSA must recognize that local flexibility and airport involvement are critical to devising workable solutions regardless of whether federal or private screeners are deployed at a given airport facility. At the airport level, this means TSA should delegate more day-to-day operational authority to Federal Security Directors.

Local Flexibility Critical in Addressing Short-Term Problems With Screening

The subject of today's hearing suggests that better management of the existing screener workforce could help alleviate some of the problems we are currently experiencing with passenger and baggage screening. Airports agree. TSA continues to struggle with recruiting, assessing, hiring, training, and retaining screeners – a fact that is evidenced by large vacancy rates at a number of airports across the country. In Oakland, for example, it is my understanding that the vacancy rate stands at 25 percent, and there are other airports that report similar problems with filling screener staff positions. The problems are exacerbated by high attrition rates for screeners. In Miami, for example, I understand that an average of 40 screeners leave each month.

In many instances, the strict rigidity of TSA in its hiring and staffing practices seems to be the source of current problems. A number of my colleagues tell me that many issues could be resolved through more flexible staffing schedules or through the use of additional part-time workers, for example. Unfortunately, there does not yet appear to be sufficient flexibility locally to tackle problems that are inherently local in nature. TSA has made some progress in this area, but we still have a long way to go. This is an area where the personnel practices of the private companies in the SPP offer some innovative examples and solutions for TSA.

As is the case in so many areas relating to security, one size does not fit all. The challenges in Washington, D.C. with regard to hiring, placing, and maintaining screeners are not the same as they are in San Francisco or Providence or New York. Each of these locations has unique local labor markets, unique balances between local and connecting traffic, unique seasonal traffic patterns, unique airport configurations, and so on down the list. To be effective, responsiveness to local airport operational characteristics must be the guiding criterion for the hiring and management of workforces.

While my colleague from San Francisco can ably discuss the specifics of his situation there with the PP5 program, it appears that the airport and the qualified private screening company have managed to devise a flexible and creative approach that has enabled them to side-step some of the issues that other airports are currently experiencing with screening under TSA management. Screener vacancy rates in San Francisco are incredibly low when compared to their counterparts on the other side of the Bay in Oakland, who continue to struggle with local workforce issues, as I mentioned earlier. While further refinements are needed, the experience at the PP5 airports has proven that flexibility and active local involvement are key components to successful screening operations. It is no surprise, then, that the original PP5 airports are inclined to remain part of the Screening Partnership Program.

Federal Government Should Make Screening Partnership Program a Viable Option for Airports

Unfortunately, the role of local airport operators in the existing Screening Partnership Program – the extension of the PP5 program – is minimal. The only real authority that an airport operator now has is to raise its hand at the beginning of the process and express an interest in having TSA use a private contractor. After that, airports have virtually no say in how screening operations will be designed; they are not allowed to decide the specific qualified screening company that will operate at their airport; and they have no role in deciding how screening will ultimately function at their facility. The only thing that an airport potentially gets out of participating in the current program is enormous potential liability exposure. Given that construct, it is not surprising that only a couple of smaller airports have expressed an interest in opting out.

In order to make the opt-out program truly viable, the law must be changed to give airports additional control over the design and implementation of plans for passenger and baggage screening at their individual facilities. Airports, for example, must be free, should they so choose, to select and contract directly with the qualified companies with which they intend to work and establish the scope of work rather than wait for TSA to make such decisions. TSA should remain responsible for establishing standards and providing regulatory oversight, but airports should be given the freedom to decide how best to get the job done. We believe that TSA is best suited for regulatory functions while airport operators and their private sector partners are best suited for operational and customer service functions.

Additionally, serious consideration must be given to providing airports with liability protection. San Francisco has done an enormous amount of work in coming up with a series of specific recommendations in this area, and I believe Congress must address these issues if there is to be meaningful participation in the program.

Many of these items obviously require statutory changes. As Congress moves forward with its discussion in this area, I would encourage you to consider the following:

- **Airport operators must be given the authority to select and enter into contracts directly with qualified screening companies to screen passengers and property at the airport.** Under current law, airports simply apply to participate in the program and then rely on TSA to select qualified vendors. TSA – as opposed to airports – enters into contracts with those vendors to perform passenger and baggage screening. Airports must be given a more prominent role in the process and more control in managing the contracts and performance.

- **Airport operators must be given the ability to perform passenger and baggage screening directly if they so choose.** The law must make clear that airport operators should be able to qualify as a qualified screening company.
- **TSA should establish a notification process under which airports submit a detailed proposal for passenger and baggage screening for approval.** Under current law, interested airports apply to participate and the process moves on from there without their involvement. Interested airports should be encouraged to work closely with qualified private sector partners and then submit that plan to TSA for approval.
- **Participating airports must be given protection from liability exposure.**

This is not intended to be a comprehensive and final list, but it is included for purposes of moving the discussion forward and to give the subcommittee an idea of some of the specific concerns that a number of airport operators have raised as impediments to participation. If some of these items were to be resolved, I believe that many airports would at minimum give the program a much closer look.

In addition to encouraging additional local involvement and new and creative approaches to screening, the opt-out program potentially could be utilized to move forward with the in-line installation of EDS equipment at participating airports. By providing interested airport operators with additional control and a steady and reliable funding stream – either by guaranteeing a base level of continued funding to support screening operations or by alternative means such as a formula that captures key airport characteristics such as passengers and amount of baggage screened – some airports might be willing to move forward on their own with in-line systems. The concept here is to capture and utilize the eventual personnel savings from in-line systems to pay for the initial capital investment and debt that a participating airport would use to fund that system. We have had numerous conversations with the subcommittee staff about this concept and believe that it has a great deal of potential – if the hurdles mentioned above can be cleared.

Mr. Chairman, I should note that even if Congress is able to make all of the changes I have highlighted here, there are a number of airports across the country that will not be interested in participating in the SPP. For that reason, it is imperative that TSA be encouraged to be innovative, creative, flexible, and inclusive in its approach to screening regardless of the type of employee who ultimately screens the passenger or their baggage. The keys as I have repeatedly mentioned are local flexibility, airport involvement, and tough security standards that all organizational models are compelled to meet.

Beyond additional local flexibility, we believe that it is critical that the agency establish measures and performance standards for passenger processing. While the 10-minute goal established initially by DOT Secretary Mineta may not be exactly the right standard, it is clear that a reasonable goal must be established and that the TSA and the full array of passenger and cargo processing personnel employed by the federal government must be held accountable for meeting such goals. We have goals holding the airlines accountable for meeting their schedules; it is only appropriate and right that we do the same with the federal workforce. Only by setting a standard can TSA and airport managers know that the workforce size and deployment model for their airport is the appropriate one.

While security is obviously the priority imperative, maintaining the efficient, effective functioning of the aviation system is also critical. We cannot realistically expect the traveling public to forever wait for improvements in a system that is often viewed as unnecessarily and increasingly intrusive and inefficient. The more hassle involved, the less inclined people will be to board aircraft. We have already seen convincing evidence that passengers who have an option have already forsaken air travel: short distance trips have seen the greatest decline in patronage. Too often, the effect has been to remove a spoke community from its connecting hub. Those truths have had, and will continue to have, a profound effect on the airline industry and its financial well-being.

In the Long-Term, Technology is Crucial in Meeting Passenger and Baggage Screening Challenges

The subcommittee is well aware of the promise that technology holds in improving passenger and baggage screening thanks to its recent hearings on the subject. The airport community offered a very thorough assessment of the case for moving forward with in-line EDS installation and the deployment of programs like Secure Flight and Registered Traveler that can help focus the process on dangerous people before they ever have access to the aviation system.

Mr. Chairman, while more effectively managing the screener workforce is critical in improving screening efficiency and effectiveness, technology is the most critical component to creating a workable screening system in the long-term. As the 9/11 Commission recognized in its report and as experience has proven at the handful of airports that have in-line EDS systems, investing in technology can greatly enhance security while dramatically reducing costs.

The findings of the Government Accountability Office are compelling. At the nine airports where TSA has committed resources to moving EDS equipment in-line, these systems will save the federal government **\$1.3 billion over seven years** through a dramatic reduction in personnel requirements. In-line EDS systems at those nine airports are estimated to reduce by 78 percent the number of TSA baggage screeners and supervisors required to screen checked baggage from 6,645 to 1,477. **TSA will recover its initial investment in in-line systems at those airports in just over a year.**

When you take the time to consider these facts, it is hard to comprehend why it is that the federal government hasn't acted more quickly to install in-line systems at airports across the country. Yet, here we sit with in-line systems operational in only a handful of airports, with screening workforces unnecessarily deployed to labor-intensive solutions, and with the Administration and Congress seemingly content with moving forward at only a few additional airports. At the Washington airports and at dozens of additional airports across the country where in-line systems make sense, there is currently no financing plan in place to move forward with in-line EDS projects. That is a startling and disappointing fact.

Some have suggested that airports should simply bite the bullet and move forward on their own without federal assistance, but those suggestions ignore reality. Setting aside the fact that passenger and baggage screening is the direct responsibility of the federal government, this approach isn't feasible at most airports, including those for which I am responsible. Plowing new resources into helping the federal government meet its obligations in this area would take money away from critical safety and capacity-enhancing projects and put an additional burden on our partners in the airline industry for an item that we were promised as necessary for homeland security.

Mr. Chairman, the federal government needs to invest now in making the promises of in-line EDS systems and other technologies a reality. While the up-front costs are certainly significant, these investments pay for themselves in short-order while dramatically improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the nation's passenger and baggage screening system.

Conclusion

After nearly four years of living with the current screening apparatus in our facilities, it is clear that placing a band-aid on today's broken system is not the answer moving forward. In the short-term, TSA must encourage additional local input and flexibility and work to make the opt-out program a viable opportunity for airport operators. In the long-term, technology holds the key to addressing screening issues and many other aviation-security related challenges. The sooner the federal government can make the necessary investments, the sooner we can all begin to reap the benefits of enhanced security and efficiency.

Thank you for allowing me to testify today.